

work of “European and global rebordering” (29). Aleksandra Sojka takes a feminist perspective to analyze the concept of citizenship by reflecting on the case study of Polish female labor migrants in Spain. In her investigation, Sojka uses the theoretical framework of intersectionality to analyze the categories of whiteness, Europeanness, gender, and nationality to unravel the “complex positionality between privilege and disadvantage,” as illustrated in the positioning of the white women in the essentially racialized sphere of the domestic work (195). Lenita Freidenvall and Drude Dahlerup’s chapter addresses women’s (mis)representation in the political scene. Focusing on the electoral gender and minority quotas, their study is based on the postal questionnaires administered to the political parties of Europe and on the interviews conducted in Poland, Macedonia, and Sweden. They question the possibility of inclusion of minorities within the political sphere, especially as resulting of the improvement of women’s positions in politics.

In concluding the volume, Myra Marx Ferree discusses the challenges it poses to readers by taking the perspective of those who are invisible or “erased” (253). The book provokes the readers to come to some differential conclusions and perceptions of the borderlands of Europe and understand the gradation of hierarchies meandering across the “borderlands” between the Orient and Occident. Moreover, focusing on the “excluded” voices allows us to see some other “truths,” otherwise overshadowed by the dominant hegemonic discourses. My only critique would be insufficient empirical coverage in the chapters conspicuously relying on empirical research. Nevertheless, for scholars in the post/decolonial theory, gender studies, and feminist theory in the postsocialist world, the volume is an excellent example of how to address the questions of borderlands critically, vocalize the invisible, and rethink the very transnationalism.

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## A Queer History of Communism: Navigating Sexuality and Gender in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1989

Věra Sokolová. *Queer Encounters with Communist Power: Non-heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989*. Prague: Karolinum Press, Charles University, 2021.

**L**ife under communism is often presented in totalizing and simplistic terms. Věra Sokolová’s book *Queer Encounters with Communist Power: Non-heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989* provides a welcomed and compelling contribution to this history by exploring the experiences of queer and non-heterosexual people’s lives under state-socialism in Czechoslovakia. This review examines this timely work and brings

it into conversation with Kateřina Lišková's recently published book *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (2018), in exploring queer experiences in Czechoslovakia from different perspectives. Taken together, these two books provide a rich and complex picture of life under communism for queer and non-heterosexual people. The books converge in parsing out the subtle, though no less impactful, political experiences of the queer and non-heterosexual community that opens the door for future explorations. Readers will, however, be confronted by the diversity amongst people's lived experiences through a gender-based lens. While readers might take issue with Sokolová's wide scope in terms of gender and sexual transgressiveness, others will appreciate the broadly inclusive nature of the work. I underscore the importance of Sokolová's book in the current era when far-right actors in the region contest not only rights but the very existence of gender itself.

*Queer Encounters with Communist Power* provides oral history interviews with people who identify as lesbian, gay, transexual<sup>1</sup>, and queer after 1989 but have lived the majority of their lives possessing "queer" and "non-heterosexual" identities during the period of state socialism in Czechoslovakia. Sokolová brings together an impressive amount of data on a group of individuals rarely studied in the historical literature. Drawing on previous work by the Society for Queer Memory (SfQM) as well as her own interviews, the book includes 45 oral history interviews with people who identify as "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," "transexual," "homosexual," "transgender," and those who express "lesbian desire," painting a complex and multi-faceted picture of life under state socialism in Czechoslovakia for people who identify as queer and non-heterosexual.

Sokolová pays particular attention to the lives of non-heterosexual women whose stories were underrepresented in the SfQM queer oral history project. In addition, she collects extensive information on the narrators' entire lives from childhood through 1989, allowing her to trace an individual's identity formation over time, examines their various interactions with communist state institutions, and how they navigated their identities with family and friends as they grew up. Unlike the SfQM, which begins the narrator's stories around adolescence or early adulthood, Sokolová captures recollections of the narrators' negotiation of their gender identities beginning in primary school.

In addition to the oral histories, Sokolová provides a discursive analysis of sexological literature, including 120 books and articles from the Bibliographia Medica Českoslovaca (BMČ) database at the National Medical Library in Prague. She contextualizes her analysis using historical literature written about the field of sexology in Czechoslovakia, works on feminism and gender in Czechoslovakia, the history of state laws regarding homosexuality, and discourses surrounding homosexuality prevalent throughout the Eastern Bloc.

<sup>1</sup> This is the terminology used by Sokolová throughout the book, which is problematized later in the review.

Sokolová's book makes three important contributions to both LGBT history in central and eastern Europe and the historical literature documenting life under communism. First, it contributes to scholarly work regarding the lives of queer people in the twentieth century. While there has been much written on life under communism throughout central and eastern Europe, this book fills a gap by looking into the lived experiences of queer and non-heterosexual people, particularly queer women and lesbians, during this time period. Second, while much has been written on the oppressive nature of the communist regimes throughout central and eastern Europe, this book reveals the complexity of life under communism, highlighting not only times and spaces where the narrators acted agentially over their life choices and identities but also the complex nature of the state institutions themselves. For example, Chapter 6 goes into great detail about how a young man, «Josef,» engaged in a year-and-a-half-long struggle with the Federal Office for Press and Information (FÚTI) and the Czech Office for Press and Information (ČÚTI) over the rejection of his same-sex personal ad from the daily *Svobodně Slovo* in 1985, when there was no law against publishing same-sex ads. This represents «a rare moment of open defiance and 'speaking back'» (p. 196). Finally, Sokolová not only highlights sites of agency under state socialism, but she also applies a gender lens to the study of state socialism in Czechoslovakia, offering an alternative to the narrative of the totalizing power of the state by engaging with how «people constructed their subjectivity and negotiated their identities under state socialism» (p. 20). While there has been quite a lot written on women and feminism (or lack thereof) under state socialism, *Queer Encounters with Communist Power* provides insight into the various negotiations of gender and sexuality under state socialism and the uniqueness of the Czechoslovak context.

### Sexological discourse, the state, and queer lived experience

Sokolová's book engages extensively with the sexological literature produced under state socialism and critiques previous histories about the field of sexology in Czechoslovakia. One such important disagreement is with previous studies that argue that the Communist regime was totalizing in its effects on the queer and non-heterosexual communities of Czechoslovakia and the former Eastern Bloc. Thus, *Queer Encounters with Communist Power* can be read in conversation with Kateřina Lišková's 2018 book, *Sexual liberation, socialist style: communist Czechoslovakia and the science of desire, 1945–1989* (Lišková 2018). In this book, Lišková argues that unlike in the West, where discourse around sexuality shifted from conservative to liberal throughout the twentieth century, in state socialist Czechoslovakia, the discourse shifted from liberal to conservative. She separates sexological discourse into two time periods. The first is the long 1950s (1948–the early 1960s), in which the “traditional” family was seen as bourgeois, and men and women were encouraged to see each other as equals. The second is the period of Normalization

from the attempted Prague Spring in 1968 through 1989. During this period, discourses surrounding the benefits of the nuclear family and traditional gender roles were reinstated to address the declining birth rate. Lišková argues that gender discourses were reversed under the period of Normalization, resisting the dominant Western linear narrative of emancipation connected to social movement struggles and highlighting a nonlinear route of liberalization. Rather than liberation coming from below, the Communist state played a large role in gender and sexual liberation in the long 1950s. Lišková analyzes archival sources documenting how sexologists, demographers, and psychologists advised the state on population development, marriage, and family, affecting people's private and intimate lives.

Given that these two books reach different conclusions about the lives of women, gender minorities, and sexual minorities under state socialism, understanding the differences between these two works is informative. Lišková's work focuses primarily on discourses in the official Czechoslovak sexological literature. In contrast, Sokolová's work focuses on the lived experiences of queer and non-heterosexual people and their interactions with state sexological institutions. Lišková states her approach as such,

There are always issues between normative discourses and lived practices. Yet, normative discourses tend to be potent, particularly when they are backed by the power of the state that translates them into laws and policies. Thus, the relationship between norms and people's lives is never symmetrical, the former influencing the latter with much stronger force than the other way around (p. 4).

Lišková asks the questions, "how did the state and sexology intersect? And what were the results of these intersections" (p. 16)? Thus, she focuses primarily on topics related to gender, such as reproductive rights, women's agency within marriages, and the female orgasm, through an analysis of how gender equality shifted throughout the Communist era. The extent of her discussion of non-heterosexual lives is related primarily to the topic of discourses around "deviant" sexuality in the field of sexology. Thus, she examines the ways in which sexological discourse on gender at times intersects with sexuality but does not provide a broad analysis of the various sexual identities present under state socialism as Sokolová does in her work. Indeed, Sokolová states that Lišková, along with other historians of Czechoslovak sexology,

investigated the broader picture of sexology and sexologists as a part of the state institutional authority over questions of sexuality, exploring what opportunities and limits the existence of such a particular sexological framework had for queer people themselves was not part of their endeavor (2021, 68).

Sokolová argues that they have not explored beyond the hetero-homo divide, looking into discourses and experiences of other forms of sexuality, such as queer and transgender sexuality.

One area in which Sokolová and Lišková agree is on the uniqueness of Czechoslovak sexology compared to their counterparts across the former Eastern bloc. Unlike in the former Soviet Union, where Stalin dissolved the

field of sexology, and in East Germany, Poland, and Hungary, where sexology did not take off as a field until the late 1960s and lacked an institutional home; in Czechoslovakia, sexologists were publishing scholarly monographs, giving talks to the public, and working in their own institutions, namely the Prague Sexological Institute (Lišková 2018, 12-13). Lišková does not conceptualize Czechoslovak sexologists as loyal soldiers of the Communist state but rather as experts who were part of the state apparatus, co-constituting knowledge around gender and sexuality. However, the decisive role of the state is contested by the oral history interviews conducted by Sokolová in which people found both private and communal ways to live autonomous non-heterosexual lives in state socialist Czechoslovakia. Contrary to narratives of the oppressive heteronormative nature of the state socialist regime, Sokolová finds that sexologists throughout Czechoslovakia (technically representatives of the Communist state apparatus) not only provided dignified counseling for queer and non-heterosexual people in their offices and used their offices for queer meeting spaces, they also published papers that framed homosexuality as a lifelong experience rather than a “deviant” and temporary behavior. Sokolová points out the ways in which sexologists would disseminate progressive knowledge about sexuality. In one instance, Dr. Erwin Günther, director of the sexological institute in Berlin, argued in the popular Czechoslovak weekly journal *Zdraví*, quite provocatively for the time, that sexuality occurs on a spectrum and that homosexuality is a natural variation on that spectrum; thus, non-heterosexuals should have the same rights and be afforded human dignity as heterosexuals. He claimed that any disorders a non-heterosexual person might face are due strictly to the intolerant citizens around them. He went further in the article to argue for sexual education, openness in marital advice, and the empathetic upbringing of teenage homosexuals (p. 102). In response to this article, a follow-up article was published by Radomil Resch, J.D., arguing that not all homosexual acts should be legally tolerated because it is the role of the socialist state to protect the mental development of the youth. Antonín Brzek, a renowned Czech sexologist, then responded to Resch by conceding to his critique, underscoring homosexuality as a deviant behavior and distancing himself from Dr. Günther. However, in so doing, he cited Dr. Günther’s article and instructed readers where to find it. A colleague of Dr. Brzek at the Sexological Institute, Ivo Procházka, stated that Brzek’s response was intended to subvert the state censors. Procházka stated that the series of articles was actually published to get Dr. Günther’s article into the journal; the journal was permitted to publish Dr. Günther’s article provided that they provided a critical commentary (p.102-103).

### Czecho(Slovak) queer lives

Many histories are written by and about those in what is historically referred to as “the Czech lands.” Thus, the lives of Slovaks under state socialism are historically underrepresented in the histories of Czechoslovakia, and

Sokolová's work is no exception. She claims her book is a study of "queer encounters with communist power; non-heterosexual lives and the state in Czechoslovakia 1948–1989," however, there is very little, if any, reference to the lives of Slovaks. Instead, the study remains relegated to that of Czechs living in Prague and Brno. She includes material from the *Bibliographia Medica Čechoslovaca* (BMČ), which would ostensibly contain articles written by both Czech and Slovak sexologists. She is also explicit about her use of the SfQM, based in Prague. Sokolová's study would greatly benefit from engagement with the lives of queer and non-heterosexual people living in the Slovak region under state socialism. Given that the Slovak region historically has higher levels of religiosity around Catholicism, it would be interesting to know if queer and non-heterosexual Slovaks had different experiences navigating their identity under state socialism and within their communities than their Czech counterparts.

### Patriarchy and heteronormativity under communism

Sokolová puts great effort into incorporating the narratives of those with various queer and non-heteronormative identities into the study, which is both a strength and a weakness of the work. On pages 21–24, Sokolová highlights the complex nature of the terminology used in the book. Many of her narrators adopted the terms "lesbian," "gay," and "transsexual" after the fall of the Communist regime but did not refer to themselves as such during the state socialist period or even "hated the terms." Moreover, many people did not see themselves as having "same-sex" desires, given that they identified as "transsexual." She claims, "the only thing that connected all the narrators was their rejection of heterosexual subjectivity, whether in terms of sexual orientation or gender identification" (p. 21).

On the one hand, incorporating the various identities allows her to show how the community supported one another. One example of this was the repeated mention by the narrators of a "queer ashtray." Similar ashtrays appeared in queer-friendly pubs and served as an indication of a shared collective identity (p. 179). On the other hand, Sokolová's study lacks a clear distinction between gender analysis and an analysis of sexual identities. For example, it is unclear how gender-nonconforming individuals experienced life under state socialism differently from those who were non-heterosexual. Judith Butler states that gender acts are "both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted" (Butler 1988, 521). If we take the performative nature of gender into account, one could assume that gender-nonconforming individuals might be more publicly visible than non-heterosexual people, who can practice their sexuality outside the public eye. Thus, gender non-conforming and transgender people would be publicly visible and, therefore, could be subjected to more harassment and state control.

Indeed, Sokolová finds that many interviewees expressed gender transgressive identities, some of which they were punished for. Based on the recol-

lections of the interviewees, this transgressing of gender borders was tolerated and even encouraged in young girls. In contrast, male narrators harbored childhood memories of being rejected and humiliated for their gender transgressions (p.134). In another example, in Chapter 5, Sokolová offers the story of one narrator “Kamila” who was the winner of the Prague regional round of the nationwide competition for “The Perfect Girl” (Správná dívka). Kamila, a lesbian woman, was asked about her decision to participate in “The Perfect Girl” contest, and she answered, “To hide, of course!” (p.146). Thus, in this instance, her overt performance of hyper-femininity allowed her non-heterosexual sexuality to remain hidden amongst her colleagues at Prague City Hall.

Sokolová makes clear that the field of sexology in Czechoslovakia was unique regarding the rest of the Eastern Bloc. Rather than drawing on work from their Soviet and Polish counterparts, which labeled transsexuality as deviant, Czechoslovak sexologists openly dismissed work from their Soviet and Polish counterparts, calling it “inappropriate” and labeled transexual lives as “natural” (p. 83). Nevertheless, the narrators point to greater difficulties in expressing their transgressive gender identities than their transgressive sexuality. In particular, one narrator, “Petra,” a transwoman, discusses the support she received from her sexologist in coming out to her parents as being sexually attracted to males. While, with her sexologist’s help and support, her parents could not only accept but celebrate her sexuality, she never told her parents about her transgressive gender identity. Sokolová states,

While they fully accept their son’s presumed homosexuality, Petra feels transsexuality would be a whole new and qualitatively different matter. Her fears support scholarly arguments that homosexuality is by far the most accepted form of ‘deviance’ from the heterosexual norm. Its acceptance rests precisely in that it is compatible with the heteronormative gender order and dual understanding of homosexuality as a simple inversion of heterosexuality, which does not challenge the stable categories of man and woman. Transsexuality, with its confusing dimensions of both gender and sexuality is unacceptable for many people, even though we have seen that Czech and Slovak Socialist sexologists treated it with unexpected empathy and complexity (p. 129-130).

In the same vein, while Sokolová’s endeavor to complicate the dominant narrative of lives under state socialism is commendable, given that so much has been written on the totalizing effects of communism on the lives of women, queer, and non-heterosexual people, the analysis seems to lack a description of the experience of people who were outwardly non-heterosexual. Her interviewees found ways to subvert the state socialist institutions, hide their sexual identities from their colleagues, and find partners through personal ads. But these interviews indicated that the state was willing to look the other way as long as the outward guise of heteronormativity was not challenged. Utilizing feminist International Relation scholar Cynthia Enloe’s definition of patriarchy as “the structural and ideological system that perpetuates the privileging of masculinity” (Enloe 2004, 4), one can understand how gender

and sexuality are entwined within the patriarchal and heteronormative state, which is premised on the gender binary. Given that many gender scholars from central and eastern Europe have highlighted how patriarchy under communist regimes differed from patriarchy in the “West,” knowing how the state would react if this were outwardly challenged would be an important contribution to understanding the heteronormative and patriarchal elements of communist power in Czechoslovakia.

Moreover, many of Sokolová’s oral history interviews were conducted with people who identify as women, highlighting the experience of lesbian women under state socialism. As Sokolová points out, these women’s experiences were very different than men’s due to attitudes around lesbianism versus male homosexuality. Both Lišková and Sokolová point to the number of instances in which gay men were sentenced to treatment in psychiatric institutions throughout Czechoslovakia from 1948–1989, during which time, not one woman was sentenced by the state for such treatment. Valerie Sperling argues that homophobia is rooted in misogyny, which she describes as the perceived inferiority of women relative to men in her analysis of Putin’s use of masculinity to maintain political legitimacy in Russia. She states,

While the familiar binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality is a mid-twentieth-century innovation of the middle class, describing sexual practices as “masculine” or “feminine” (appropriate to men and women, respectively) is a longer-standing way to categorize people and identify their relative status and power. The dual notions of “topping” (a way to describe traditionally male or “insertive” sexual practices) and “bottoming” (the receptive or penetrated position traditionally affiliated with women) predate homo- and heterosexuality as concepts but likewise draw on misogyny for their meaning (Sperling 2015, 17).

Examples such as this attest to the patriarchal nature of the state and seeing male deviance from heterosexuality as a deviance of traditional notions of masculinity which must be highly policed by the state in the way in which female deviance from heterosexuality and traditional notions of feminism (which is already devalued) is not. The necessities of teasing out the analytical categories of gender and sexuality become all the more important as scholars attempt to understand better the role of patriarchy and heteronormativity in both domestic and global politics.

## Conclusions

Students of Czechoslovak twentieth-century history will find Sokolová’s book insightful. Her data and analysis enrich our knowledge of the complexity of this era of Czechoslovak history. In addition, this book contributes to the literature on gender and sexuality outside of the Western context. Thus, students of gender and sexuality studies would find her work useful in expanding their conceptions of how gender and sexual identity are understood and negotiated in diverse contexts.

Additionally, Sokolová's book is an invaluable contribution during the current period of far-right, anti-gender politics prevalent throughout Czechia, Slovakia, Europe, and indeed around the world. In recent years, gender studies as a discipline, gender scholars as individuals, and the very term "gender" has faced severe opposition from the so-called "anti-gender" movement. Anti-gender actors are an amalgamation of conservative politicians, Church leaders, and men's rights activists who have connected "gender" to their opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, reproductive rights, and sex education in schools. These conservative actors argue that "gender theory" and LGBTQ+ rights are a Western import that threatens the traditional societies of central and eastern Europe (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). Sokolová's work, which highlights how queer and non-heterosexual people navigated their identities historically in Czechoslovakia and the role of sexologists in not only defining concepts of identity but also in accepting and supporting queer and non-heterosexual people under state socialism, is crucial today in demonstrating how these identities have been negotiated within the Czechoslovak context historically, resisting anti-gender actors' claim of LGBT politics and gender as a "Western" import without a local history and struggle.

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